

There is an article on the current Town Meeting warrant brought by a concerned citizen regarding bus transportation to the Amherst Survival Center (ASC). The Survival Center appreciates the spirit behind the warrant article as well as the efforts of its organizers to bring it forward. It is not clear that this particular article is the right solution to the transportation issue, however. Therefore, the Survival Center cannot support passage of this article at this time.

Some background:

In December, 2012, the Amherst Survival Center moved from its cramped basement location to a new home 0.3 miles north of the old facility (138 Sunderland Road). The new building doubles our service space from 3,000 to 6,000 square feet and has led to a drastic improvement in program scope and delivery. The additional space allows for a dining room with enough seating for all; a devoted health clinic area providing privacy to clients and doctors; more efficient delivery and sorting of donated food and goods; private counseling offices; and expanded parking for better access for donors and clients. The children we serve benefit further from designated children's activity areas in both the Free Store and Pantry; and a new outdoor space with picnic tables and room to play. Thanks to our new consulting and workshop rooms, the ASC has also been able to welcome new partner agencies, such as Community Action, who now provide vital services on-site, such as Fuel Assistance and Tax Preparation, and to hold a variety of workshops that help ASC participants move beyond a condition of need.

In general, judging by the increase in the number of people utilizing ASC programs, services have become overall more accessible in the new building. The ASC served over 4,000 people in 2012 (65% of them residents of Amherst), and this number is clearly going up. The number of Amherst residents using the ASC Food Pantry has increased 13% in the last three months (part of an 18% overall increase), and the hot meal program has experienced a 50% increase in meals served (from 1,000 to 1,500 hot meals per month) since the move.

Transportation:

There are some participants with limited mobility for whom the 0.3 mile walk to the new building presents an obstacle. In addition, for many others it is a long walk when carrying groceries and other vital supplies from the ASC back to the bus stop.

The ASC is taking this problem very seriously. In addition to promoting ride-sharing and carpooling among ASC participants, we have engaged a local taxi company to run a shuttle on Tuesdays, serving approximately 40 people weekly. We are currently working with the PVTA and the Transportation Committee to determine whether a solution involving one of the bus routes is feasible or whether an ongoing shuttle would provide the best long-term approach. Of course, any transportation solution will require that we approach stakeholders and ASC supporters for a sustainable source of funding, and we are working on that as well.

Summary:

The ASC is grateful that the issue has been brought to the attention of the community with this warrant article. However, the article has been offered prematurely, circumventing the process in which the Survival Center is already engaged and without full consideration of the full context and consequences. The ASC, therefore, does not support passage of this article at this time.